

Homily for August 4, 2017

1789 saw Paris in turmoil. The French Revolution resulted in a social, economic, political and ecclesial earthquake that would change France forever. Notre Dame Cathedral, built in the 13th Century became a place to house horses and other animals, in other words France's giant stable. Sainte Chapelle, a five-minute walk from Notre Dame had much of its beautiful stained glass removed and clear-glass was installed. No longer the room to adorn the Crown of Thorns that King Louis IX had bought from the Emperor of Constantinople in the 13th century, it became an administrative office for those orchestrating the Revolution. Then with Napoleon's star was ascending and his vision to make France the dominant European Power, with Paris the Empire's crown jewel, resulted in years of war and persecution against the Catholic Church, including the following. General Berthier, a key leader in the French Army, marched to Rome, entered it unopposed on 10 February 1798, and, proclaiming a Roman Republic, demanded of the pope the renunciation of his temporal authority. Upon Pius VI's refusal he was taken prisoner, and on 20 February was escorted from the Vatican to Siena, and thence to the Certosa near Florence. He was eventually taken to Valence France where he died in exile on August 29th 1799.

As one historian comments, "Rarely in all her history had the Church undergone a more critical time." Europe was torn by revolution and war. The cardinals were scattered, some imprisoned, others deported. Rome was occupied by the armies of the kingdom of Naples, in league with Napoleon. How was a new pope to be elected? How were the cardinals to be assembled? And where? Some spoke mockingly of Pius VI as "Pius the Last."¹

Now with all of this in mind, let's think of another date. Three years before the Revolution, 1786, John Vianney was born in a rural part of France. So, while not in the heart of the revolutionary furor he grew up in a country that was changing radically with an increasingly pungent anti-clerical odour in the air.

Born into humble circumstances, Saint Vianney's parents modeled a pious lifestyle, practicing the corporal and spiritual works of mercy as a family. At age 20, Saint Vianney decided to leave his rural upbringing and attend secondary education. His studies progressed slowly and a decade later he was ordained, despite aptitudes of compassion over those of learning. With this 'tender heart', he opened an orphanage and began to minister in the local parish in the aftermath of the Revolution in the town of Ars. He was appointed curé, minister of souls, and was known to spend up to 18 hours a day in the confessional. Over time, his methods rippled internationally, as up to tens of thousands of pilgrims traveled annually seek his counsel. He was canonized in 1925 by Pope Pius XI.

¹ Gallagher OMV, Timothy M.. Begin Again: The Life and Spiritual Legacy of Bruno Lanteri (Kindle Locations 1159-1163). The Crossroad Publishing Company. Kindle Edition.

St. John Vianney models for us a theme expressed in our reading from Leviticus. Although we live in the world, our lives are to be marked primarily by sacred time, as Moses was instructed to establish the key festivals of the Jewish Year.

St John Vianney was also a man who faced great opposition, like Jesus experienced when he went home to Nazareth. Just as our Lord was not deterred by the skepticism and unbelief all around him, neither was John Vianney.

He once wrote:

My little children, reflect on these words: the Christian's treasure is not on earth but in heaven. Our thoughts, then, ought to be directed to where our treasure is. This is the glorious duty of man: to pray and to love. If you pray and love, that is where a man's happiness lies.²

A life centred on love for God and love for people can be lived in any and every social, and political climate. Therefore St. John Vianney is not only an inspiration for priests as to how to live out the vocation of Holy Orders, he is also an inspiration to all those who want to live daily a directed life centred on prayer and love.

May we in our day, who face challenges in the culture that can be discouraging never give into such desolation.

St John Vianney, pray for us that we be a people like you, zealous for God and the salvation of souls.

² Liturgy of the Hours: Office of Readings, 2nd Reading for August 4